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ABSTRACT

Past studies in child development have clearly established that motor development is the basis for later, higher-order developmental processes. The motor developmental approach to learning focuses on the acquisition of skills and concepts in various academic subjects through motor activities. It is based partly on the theory that children, being predominantly movement-oriented, will perform better when "academic learning" occurs with some kind of pleasurable physical activity. Three recent studies have shown that children have become better readers and more favorably oriented to academic activities when a motor developmental approach augmented reading and other types of language instruction. (RL)

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MOTOR DEVELOPMENT AND READING ACHIEVEMENT

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Within recent years, there has been an increasing tendency for many school systems to de-emphasize the teaching of motor-readiness skills, due to the push to teach formal reading at an early age. Today, the emphasis is on individualized instruction. This necessitates a basic understanding of what it means to teach developmentally, with full recognition of the importance of including activities that enhance both gross and fine motor skills.

Studies in child development have clearly established the sequential development of the child as being a definite step-by-step process with motor development being the base of later, higher order developmental processes.

A child is not born with a motor base. It is developed as he/she learns to use his/her body motorically. There are no exact ways for him/her to go about developing this motoric system, since there are many routes he/she may take. It is necessary though, that he/she move through each of the basic areas and face situations that require him/her to sort out his/her various motor systems, moving from the most gross to the finest. It is important to keep in mind that a child learns these things by being faced with situations that require him/her to develop them. If he/she is not faced with a situation that requires him/her to perform, he/she will not learn the basic patterns necessary for his/her normal development.

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The idea of learning through motor-activity is not new. Motor development research flourished in the 1930's, was largely ignored for three decades, and has begun to flourish again as researchers re-discover its potential for understanding this pervasive part of human behavior.¹

In fact, the application of motor activity as a medium for learning was a principle of the Fro⁸belian kindergarten early in the nineteenth century. It was based on the theory that children learn and acquire information, understanding, and skill, through motor activities in which they are interested; such as building, construction, modeling, painting, and various forms of gross body movements.²

The motor-developmental approach to learning is concerned with how children can develop skills and concepts in the various academic subjects areas while actively engaged in any number of motor activities. It is based in part on the theory that children, being predominantly movement-oriented, will learn better when what arbitrarily be called "academic learning" takes place through pleasurable physical activity.³

The procedure of learning through motor activity involves the selection of an activity, such as a game, stunt, or rhythmic activity; which is taught to the children and used as a learning activity for the development of a skill or concept, in a specific subject area. An attempt is made to arrange an active learning situation so that a fundamental intellectual skill or concept is practiced or rehearsed in the course of participating in the motor activity.⁴

In a motor-developmental program, used over a period of six years, at the Jefferson School in LaCrosse, Wisconsin,⁵ three significant outcomes were observed:

- 1.) children became better readers, as results on several reading achievement tests showed marked improvement.
- 2.) changes in behavior were evident, childrens' ability to concentrate broadened, as did their attention span.
- 3.) children had more interest in their school work, and began to express themselves independently and showed increased self-confidence.

Likewise, in a study by Cobb, Chissom, and Davis,⁶ on motor performance and academic achievement for children in kindergarten, grades one and two, results were similar. From the evidence presented in this study, motor activity is highly related to academic ability at all three grade levels.

In James H. Humphery's book, Education of Children Through Motor Activity⁷ some interesting conclusions were drawn after extensive studies, and research was done on children learning through motor activity. They can be briefly summarized as follows:

- 1.) In general, children tend to learn certain academic concepts better through the motor-activity learning medium than through many of the traditional media.
- 2.) This approach, while favorable for both boys and girls, appears to be more favorable for boys.
- 3.) This approach appears to be more favorable for children with average and below-average intelligence.

Today, one of the biggest problems facing educators is the teaching of reading. And as far back as the seventeenth century there was speculation that there is a high level of compatibility between reading and motor activity.⁸ Basic facts about the nature of human beings serve educators today as principles of learning. One of these principles:

"desirable learning takes place when the child has his own purposeful goals to guide his learning activities," serves as the bases for a study by James H. Humphrey and Virginia D. Moore.⁹

This study involved a detailed study of reactions of six-to-eight-year-old children when independent reading material was coordinated with active game participation. This study was initiated on the premise of relating reading content for children to their natural urge to play.

The material developed, in terms of readability, the reading values and literary merits of the stories; and utilized childrens' natural affinity for motor-oriented play, as the motivator for their reading. In conclusion, Humphery and Moore found that motor-oriented material enriched and extended a child's experiences and reinforced his general ability to read independently, or "on his own" Also, with this procedure, the child is able to develop cognitive processing skills through the physical reality of the activity involved.

Dr. E. T. Kennedy, director of the Miriam School, New York, believes that teachers of young children who fail to recognize the vital need for teaching motor skills, on a developmental basis, overlook the importance of the relationship of such developmental skills to the following aspects
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of learning in general.

- 1.) The development of the ability to co-ordinate eye and hand in carrying out all of the many workbook and writing activities in school.
- 2.) The development of the ability to attend and concentrate.
- 3.) The development of thinking skills that are dependent on the integration of visual-motor skills, leading to high-level language comprehension.

To support this theory, Marian Wirth, who for many years has been the Perceptual-Motor teacher at the Miriam School, stated that her experience with perceptual-motor developmental games and activities helps a child extend his attention span, feel better about himself and his body, increase his ability to get along with his peers, and increase his language skills.
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They are, in her opinion, a "learning bonanza" and may well become the most learning-productive part of the child's day.

However, we should not want to make the mistake of expecting that, by providing opportunity for motor development, we will solve all of a child's learning problems. Nor, do we want to make the mistake of relegating motor development to a minor position in the scheme of his/her education. Any child who manifests motor deficiencies should be given the opportunity to experiment with his/her body and to use it in various ways.

FOOTNOTES

1

Lolas E. Halverson, "Current Research in Motor Development", Journal of Research and Development in Education. Vol. 6, No. 3, Spring, 1973, pg. 56.

2

James H. Humphery, Education of Children Through Motor Activity. Charles C. Thomas Publishing Co., Springfield, Ill. 1975, pg. 4..

3

Ibid. pg. 7.

4

Ibid. pg. 8.

5

Dorothy Krause, "A motor Approach to Learning", Instructor. Vol. 82, No.170 October, 1972, pgs. 56-59.

6

Patrick R. Cobb, Brad S. Chissom, Myron R. Davis, "Relationship Between Motor Development and Academic Measures for Children in Kindergarten, Grades One and Two". Perceptual and Motor Skills. Vol. 41, Dec. 1975, pgs. 539-546.

7

Op. Cit. James H. Humphery, pgs. 39-41.

8

Op. Cit. James H. Humphery, pg. 54.

9

James H. Humphery and Virginia D. Moore, Read and Play Series, London, Frederick Muller, Ltd. Ludgate House, 1965.

10

A quote from: Teachers' Handbook of Childrens' Games; A Guide to Developing Perceptual-Motor Skills. by: Marian Jenks Wirth, Parker Publishing Co. Inc. West Nyack, New York., 1976, pg. 6.

11

Ibid. pg. 9.